

## WRITING OF LOVE IN THE LETTERS OF SEPARATION IN *LOVE IN THE TIME OF CHOLERA* (1985[1988]), BY GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ

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### ABSTRACT

A 'writerly' production, *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Marquez with its love letters invites the reader as a producer of the text, as a co-author to investigate the infinite possibilities of the dimensions of love as dramatised in the novel. *Love in the Time of Cholera* is a profound love story, an ode to unrequited love and its extraordinary final consummation, an investigation of a rejected lover's obsession, a saga of the day to day happenings of a marriage based on the idea of stability and a pluralistic delineation of love as sickness and obsession has not been seen from the perspective of "ourselves writing" (Barthes 1973:5). In this paper I argue for a re-reading of the text for 'rewriting' it and for placing the reader as not the producer of the meaning, "but merely a privileged site where meanings interweave." (Stafford & McManus 2004:78). Florentino Ariza falls in love with the young Fermina Daza and expresses his love through letters and telegrams for fifty one year, nine months and four days. His letters are 'a dictionary of compliments, inspired by books he had learned by heart because he had read them so often' (Marquez LTC 40, quoted in Simpson LRB 1988). On the other hand, the letters of the young Juvenal Urbino are seen by Fermina as "brief and proper" (Marquez LTC 82-83) and she is "impressed by [their] simplicity and seriousness" and recognises that they are written with "a physician's handwriting." (Ibid.) The romance of Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza continues before the time she gets married to Dr. Juvenal Urbino, but Florentino Ariza's one-sided epistolary romance continues until after Fermina Daza's husband's death, when Florentino Ariza declares his love to Fermina Daza. As septuagenarians, they go together on a ship and their love goes on and when the Captain of the ship asks and Ariza replies, "Forever" (Marquez LTC 228). The novel with its dynamic and spiral narrative unfolds a complex love triangle, with its rich language. The very opening line of the novel: "It was inevitable..." (Marquez LTC 7) is ironical in its foreshadowing of a plot that is open-ended and unpredictable. It has been remarked in a brilliant study by Bell (1993: 50) that, letters have been used as a "central narrative device defining the emotional ambivalence" of Florentino Ariza but the textual evidences suggest that Ariza does not reflect any ambivalence but shows singular devotion to meet Fermina Daza through the half century of his interminable waiting. Against this background the paper will investigate, how the different aspects of love are manifested through letters in *Love in the Time of Cholera*. The paper will further explore the different aspects in Florentino Ariza's choices of relationships for survival for a prospective union with Fermina Daza for which, he has been waiting so long.

**KEYWORDS:** Writerly, Letters, Spiral Narrative, Foreshadowing & Ourselves Writing

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### INTRODUCTION

The paper concerns itself with two aspects in its proposition 'writing about love' in 'the letters of separation' in a 'text' which I have called 'writerly' taking Barthes' categorization. Obviously, it implies that all writers write but this kind of fictive discourse considers readers as co-authors or producers of the 'text.' Let us attempt to understand in what ways the readers contributed to the production of the 'text'? The 'text' is already 'written' by an 'author'/ 'writer'. The reader reads and while reading he will 'produce' the text. S/he will

‘investigate the infinite possibilities of love dramatised’ in the novel.

The love that is dramatised in the novel is primarily among three persons: Florentino Ariza, Dr. Juvenal Urbino and Fermina Daza in the centre. Fermina Daza’s beauty and haughtiness have attracted both the suitors: Florentino Ariza and Dr. Urbino. Florentino Ariza’s love for Fermina is known to the readers, through their exchange of letters and meetings and finally it is snapped by Fermina, on the basis of thinking on the part of Fermina as ‘nothing more than an illusion’ (LTC 102) and a superficial attraction. Dr. Urbino’s courtship begins between a doctor and a patient who is suspected of cholera. Again, letters are exchanged. Dr. Urbino’s personality is unfolded through the meeting of Fermina’s cousin, during their ride through the city. And finally, unwillingly and unwittingly, Fermina succumbs to the pressures of her own personality and paternity.

The novel begins with a general statement about the fate of the ‘unrequited love’ (LTC 3) foreshadowing both the suitors and their pursuits of love. Duty and domesticity are the pivots of the blessedness of Fermina’s married life. Dr. Urbino is a famous modern educated doctor with a passion for social reforms in the field of health and sanitation which he inherited from his late father. Despite a happy domesticity and children from Dr. Urbino, is Fermina Daza not happy in her married life? Does she still remember her first suitor? The scene of the two elderly lovers in which they show attachment on the ship in the river requires a deep understanding of the events and their minute analysis. Is Florentino Ariza remembered by Fermina Daza in such a way that, the readers can be sure of the final ‘requited love’ of Florentino Ariza? Florentino Ariza is greatly frustrated and devastated by the refusal of his proposal by Fermina Daza and the opposition from her father. But, he has never forgotten her. His promiscuity and cruelty that he showed in his myriad affairs, make the readers believe of the kind of love he ‘practised’ as ‘sickness’ and a metonymic variation of love as plague. Eventually, his proposal on the day of the funeral of Dr. Urbino is first vehemently refused and later takes an amazing turn, that proves that the affair they started fifty years ago has its culmination in the old age.

The paper will explore how the different aspects of love are manifested through letters in *Love in the Time of Cholera*. The paper will further explore the different aspects in Florentino Ariza’s choices of relationships, for survival for a prospective union with Fermina Daza, for which he has been waiting so long. In this exploration of Marquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera*, as a ‘writerly’ text ‘asks for reader a practical collaboration’, in which she/he is invited “to produce the text, open it out, set it going” (Barthes 1971 : 171), by writing about it, by going ahead further ideationally, thereby we create ourselves, ‘we write ourselves’ (Rolfe 1997: 447), in the process we recreate the ‘text’ for further ‘play, production, [and] practice’ (Barthes 1971: 170).

## DISCUSSIONS

### The Promise of ‘Perfect Fidelity and Everlasting Love’--‘to the Crowned Goddess’

One of the aspects that make this ‘text’<sup>1</sup> of *Love in the Time of Cholera* ‘writerly’ is the circularity/ non-linearity of the narrative. The story opens with the death of Dr. Juvenal Urbino whose ‘respectability and prestige in the province’ is unmatched. As the story progresses unfolding the domestic, social and professional lives of Dr. Urbino, we have been told also about the attraction of Florentino Ariza about the young Fermina Daza. On the day of the funeral of Dr. Urbino Florentino Ariza, expresses his love to Fermina by saying, ‘Fermina, I have waited for this opportunity for more than half a century’ and reiterates his ‘vow of eternal fidelity and everlasting love’ (LTC 60-61). From the beginning to the end (there is no end of the story as the *New Fidelity* is ordered to ‘forever’ move to and fro in the river symbolising as what

Florentino Ariza says in the novel that 'life has no limits' (*LTC* 204) love is expressed through letters. Letters have been used more than a narrative device -- the adolescent letters of Florentino Ariza to Fermina Daza first create infatuation for him and later after the death of Dr. Urbino when they meet again the letters provide her solace and 'help her recover her peace of mind' (*LTC* 302).

Encouraged by the news that Fermina, the daughter of Lorenzo Daza is studying at the Academy of the presentation of the Blessed Virgin and Florentino Ariza feels that, 'the beautiful adolescent with almond-shaped eyes' is 'within the reach of his dreams' (*LTC* 56). His 'chronic romanticism' (*LTC* 325) forces him to take 'the secret life of a solitary hunter' (*LTC* 56) and to follow the movement of Fermina Daza. Florentino Ariza, in turn is encouraged by his mother and his own passion, relentlessly pursues Fermina Daza following her, when she is going to school and in the park. He first sees her in her house when he goes to deliver a telegram to her father and 'that casual glance was the beginning of a cataclysm of love, that still had not ended half a century later.' Fermina appears to him as an 'impossible maiden', 'who walked with natural haughtiness' and 'her doe's gait making her seem immune to gravity.' '[L]ittle by little he idealized her' ...and now he thinks of sending her a note in 'his exquisite notary's hand.' (*LTC* 56) The note keeps on growing in content as the day of delivery is postponed. It is 'turning into a dictionary of compliments, inspired by the books he had learnt by heart because he read them so often during his vigils in the park. 'And finally, it 'contained more than sixty pages' (*LTC* 57). Under the almond tree Fermina Daza seems different to him, not a school-going girl but a 'crowned goddess' (*LTC* 59). After much thinking and trying, in a dramatic way, he delivers the letter to her.

The letters, like this letter, are exchanged in this novel among various characters but we seldom know the contents. With regard to the first letter of Florentino Ariza we are told by the omniscient narrator that, it contained a promise of 'his perfect fidelity and everlasting love' (*LTC* 61). The delivery of letter by Florentino creates feverish expectation in him making him unwell. Then follows the forgotten breviary with an envelope and the exchange of letters between Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza continues. The narrator informs,

Sometimes their letters were soaked by rain, soiled by mud, torn by adversity, and some were lost for a variety of other reasons, but they always found a way to be in touch with each other again. (*LTC* 69)

About the way Florentino writes the letters the narrator informs again,

Florentino Ariza wrote every night. Letter by letter, he had no mercy as he poisoned himself with the smoke from the palm oil lamps in the back room of the notions shop, and his letters became more discursive and more lunatic the more he tried to imitate his favorite poets from the Popular Library, which even at that time was approaching eighty volumes.... Desperate to infect her with his own madness, he sent her miniaturist's verses inscribed with the point of a pin on camellia petals. (69).

Florentino Ariza is a "love's creature" and a "poet dedicated to love both carnal and transcendent" (Pynchon 1988). His dream of marrying Fermina Daza is not fulfilled. Her father threatens him to leave his daughter, and Fermina's forced going away from him, though always in touch with her through telegraphic messages, do not allow them to come together. After arrival from her journey and during a chance meeting Fermina Daza declares, 'I realized that what is between us is nothing more than an illusion' (*LTC* 102). Despite Fermina's cousin Hildebranda's sympathy for Florentino's love for Fermina and Hildebranda's later realization that, Florentino is 'all love' (*LTC* 129) they do not live life together. They again come closer, with letters as a mediating strategy, after half a century keeping their love intact

creating it as “a crypt for themselves” (see “Emotional Crypt ...” 2016).

### **ONLY GOD KNOWS HOW MUCH I LOVE YOU**

If Florentino imagines Fermina, as a ‘crowned goddess’ and he has a feeling that, ‘the beautiful adolescent with almond-shaped eyes was within the reach of his dreams’ (*LTC* 56), for Dr. Urbino she is ‘like a new-sprung rose’ (*LTC* 118). Dr. Juvenal ‘is the most desirable of bachelors, he managed to keep himself in a state of grace, intact and tempting, until he succumbed without resistance to the plebeian charms of Fermina Daza’ (*LTC* 105). Fermina is suspected of contracted cholera and the Doctor visits him and the courtship ensues. While leaving Fermina’s house Dr. Urbino did not renounce his hope of saying goodbye to her, but Lorenzo Daza did not suggest it. He yearned for the innocence of her pulse, her cat’s tongue, her tender tonsils, but he was disheartened by the idea that she never wanted to see him again and would never permit him to try to see her. (*LTC* 120-121)

Fermina also has a dream about Dr. Urbino, in which the tongue depressor, which he uses to examine her throat, is not made of aluminum but of a ‘delicious metal that she had tasted with pleasure’ (*LTC* 123). The same night she finds a letter with the initials “J. U. C” on it. She opens the letter and finds it ‘brief and proper.’ She is ‘impressed by its simplicity and seriousness.’ She keeps the letter in the bottom of her trunk, where she has already kept ‘the perfumed letters’ of Florentino Ariza’s. She ‘is shaken by the rush of shame’ and finds another place to keep it. She remembers Florentino Ariza ‘and even she was surprised at how removed he was from her life: the poor man’ (*Ibid.*) Two more letters arrive and she recognizes ‘the cryptic scrawl’ as a physician’s handwriting.’ The narrator comments that, ‘beneath their propriety one could begin to detect an impatience that was never evident in the parsimonious letters of Florentino Ariza’ (*LTC* 124).

After she has a reluctant ride with her cousin Hildebranda and Dr. Urbino, she slept uncomfortably thinking of Dr. Urbino all the time. Next day she writes a letter to Dr. Urbino that, he can talk to her father. They get married. During their honeymoon, after coming closer physically, the narrator observes, he was aware that he did not love her. He married her because, he liked her haughtiness, her seriousness, her strength, and also because of her vanity on her part, but as she kissed him for the first time he was sure there would be no obstacle to their inventing true love (*LTC* 150).

The honeymoon trip to Europe brings back Fermina as a mature human being. The busy life of managing the affairs of the home keeps her occupied. Florentino Ariza is not completely forgotten. He cuts her path sometimes on social occasions, at the church and poetry festivals. Florentino Ariza keeps his love for Fermina intact though he is not able share the ‘truth’ from ‘the bleeding wounds of his heart’ (*LTC* 277). Despite the bonfire of her husband’s belongings after his death she cannot erase his memory. His benign figure follows her on her trip with Florentino Ariza.

### **‘THE REQUITED LOVE’—‘THANK YOU FOR COMING**

On the day of Dr. Urbino’s funeral Florentino Ariza proposes to widow Fermina Daza and it is vehemently rejected. After a few days he receives a letter from her. The letter is written in a rage. Florentino gives a reply to the letter, ‘attempting a new method of seduction’ (*LTC* 293) this time not by hand, but by typing it out on a type writer. Fermina is surprised to see that her letter ‘written in a blind rage’ has been ‘interpreted by Florentino Ariza, as a love letter’ (*LTC* 279). Florentino Ariza gradually comes closer; a number of letters are exchanged between them. This time, they are numbered and preserved by Fermina Daza. She thinks that, they belong to the addresser and they should be returned. Her grown up children have different reactions, to this development of intimacy between them. Her son, though surprised, approves it, but the daughter is not able to reconcile with this reality. Fermina Daza makes a ‘firm decision to go on with

her life, remembering her husband as if he had not died' (LTC 281). At the age of seventy-two, Fermina Daza 'could only understand it as a miracle of love' (309). Now, Fermina Daza 'maintained her connection to Florentino Ariza, by means of the Anachronistic thread of letters' (LTC 315). Fermina Daza misses Florentino Ariza on Tuesdays. Her loneliness is lit by the presence of Florentino Ariza and she is grateful to him, for his presence again in her life. The camellias of yesteryears turn into white roses.

## WRITING OF LOVE IN THE LETTERS OF SEPARATION

It is seen that Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza are united again, after a hiatus of half a century, never to be separated again, to be '[F]orever' (LTC 348) together sailing in the ship of 'requited love' on Magdalena river with a flag of cholera as if quarantined for the epidemic of love. They are able to 'write for themselves' an enigmatic unusual story of love in which some episodes (like the promiscuity of Florentino Ariza<sup>2</sup>) are the dark patched on 'the new fidelity' of both Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza. Their 'new fidelity' is untraditional, unusual, 'revolting' (to daughter Ofelia), difficult to understand (by some readers) and praised by many ("a revolutionary step" "this shining and heart-breaking novel" Pynchon 1988). Florentino Ariza writes his destiny, together with his 'crowned goddess' Fermina Daza in his letters. A letter written in response to her 'insulting letter' he sent the typewritten one. After receiving it and hiding it from her daughter, Fermina Daza's intention was to burn the letter later, when she was away from her daughter's questions, but she could not resist the temptation of looking at it first. She was so intrigued that, she locked herself in her bedroom to read it at her ease before she burned it, and she read it three times without pausing.

And Florentino Ariza has written 'ourselves' by reading that, Fermina Daza discovers herself. Let us deconstruct it together because, what we write as a reader is not for 'presentation' or 'publication', but we are 'writing ourselves.' Fermina's reading of the letter helps her understand the meaning of their relationship.

It was a meditation on life, love, old age, death: ideas that had often fluttered around her head like nocturnal birds but dissolved into a trickle of feathers when she tried to catch hold of them. There they were, precise, simple, just as she would have liked to see them, and once again she grieved that her husband was not alive to discuss them with her as they used to discuss certain events of the day before going to bed. In this way an unknown Florentino Ariza was revealed to her, one possessed of clear-sightedness that in no way corresponded to the feverish love letters of his youth or to the somber conduct of his entire life. They were rather, the words of a man who...was inspired by the Holy Spirit...that this letter from a wise old man...but a very noble way of erasing the past. (LTC 299)

Evidently, the letter goes beyond fulfilling only the function of a narrative device rather it is a way to measure the depth in Fermina Daza's change over the years. The letter deconstructs the emotions that were not visible from the crusts of Fermina Daza's personal haughtiness and superimposed paternity first by her father and later by her husband.

## CONCLUSIONS - 'WRITING OURSELVES'

The letters of Florentino Ariza in Fermina Daza's adolescent days, create confusion and infatuation, in her old age bring her 'complete calm' and 'seemed of such great human value' (LTC 290). Florentino Ariza through his letters create "reflective cognitive stance" (Van Manen 1990: 125-26 quoted in Rolfe 1997: 444), he writes for "discovery" and he is like the readers together "we are writing not for others but for ourselves" (Ibid. 445). As readers "[W]hen we write, we are not merely creating ideas, we are creating ourselves, we write ourselves" (Ibid. 447). Thus Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* is more than a love story. Its 'text' is 'plural' (168). It "asks of the reader a practical collaboration" (Barthes 1971:

171). A collaborative reading deconstructs the text and recreates a new one. At the end of the novel, at the age of 78, Florentino Ariza begins his new journey “he journeys into love against time” (Pynchon 1988). He tells the Captain with utmost conviction, “Let us keep going, going, going, back to La Dorada.” At this the Captain asks,

“Do you mean what you say?”

“From the moment I was born, said Florentino Ariza, “ I never said anything I did not mean” (LTC 348)

Florentino Ariza, President of the Caribbean Riverboat Company and his love, Fermina Daza start a new journey “Forever” beyond death, towards eternity. Marquez in his ‘writerly’ text has signified a new dimension of love through a ‘magic; that centres around writing as space for “[A]n epiphany to late-flowering love” (Shakespeare ND).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The ‘of rewriting texts for ourselves is taken to the extreme ... by Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges (1981).’ (Rolfe 1997: 445). The reader rewrites the text. “Each individual reading of a text has therefore the potential to become a text itself” (Rolfe 1997: 446).
- <sup>2</sup> About his exploits Florentino Ariza has written “Some twenty-five note books, with six hundred twenty two entries of long term liaison, apart from the countless fleeting adventures that did not even deserve a charitable note.” (LTC 152)
- What is reason for Florentino Ariza’s adventures? How can we explain it? I have found two characters who have suffered agonies and tried to forget it: one is Dr. Alexander Manett in Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* ( 1859 ) and the other one is Silas Marner in George Eliot’s novel (1861 ) of the same name. In order to forget the trauma of imprisonment Dr. Manett makes himself busy in making and mending shoes. Similarly, Silas in order to forget the deception of his friend William Dane keeps himself confined to weaving and hoarding money that he earns. Florentino Ariza tries to forget the rejection by Fermina Daza by involving himself in his adventures waiting for the death of Dr. Urbino. But the difference is while Dr. Manett’s and Silas’s are living like a recluse with a work which is related to their further enrichment of personalities as well as a social cause --in case of Dr. Manett the French Revolution and in that of Silas’s rehabilitation of an orphan. But Florentino’s case is related to his own personal reasons and is also problematic if we think about the reasons for the murder of Olympia Zuleta and the suicide of America Vicuna.

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